

# The Triflers

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said. "But, first—can you give me apartments on the same floor—for myself and maid? I am his fiancée," she told him.

"I can give mademoiselle apartments adjoining," said the clerk eagerly.

"Then do so."

She signed her name in the register, and beckoned for Marie.

"Marie," she said, "you may return and finish packing my trunks. Please bring them here."

"Here?" queried Marie.

"Here," answered Marjory.

She turned to the clerk.

"Take me upstairs at once."

There was a strong smell of ether in the hall outside the door of Monte Covington's room. It made her gasp for a moment. It seemed to make concrete what, after all, had until this moment been more or less vague. That pungent odor was a grim reality. So was that black-bearded Doctor Marcellin who, leaving his patient in the hands of his assistant, came to the door wiping his hands upon a towel.

"I am Mr. Covington's fiancée—Miss Stockton," she said at once. "You will tell me the truth?"

After one glance at her eyes Doctor Marcellin was willing to tell the truth. "It is an ugly bullet wound in his shoulder," he said.

"It is not serious?"

"Such things are always serious. Luckily, I was able to find the bullet and remove it. It was a narrow escape for him."

"Of course," she added, "I shall serve as his nurse."

"Good," he nodded.

But he added, having had some experience with fiancées as nurses:

"Of course I shall have for a week my own nurse also; but I shall be glad of your assistance. This—er—was an accident?"

She nodded.

"He was trying to save a foolish friend from killing himself."

"I understand."

"Nothing more need be said about it?"

"Nothing more," Dr. Marcellin assured her. "If you will come in I will give you your instructions. Mademoiselle Duval will soon be here."

"Is she necessary?" inquired Marjory. "I have engaged the next apartment for myself and maid."

"That is very good, but—Mademoiselle Duval is necessary for the present."

She followed the doctor into Monte's room. She heard him muttering a name. She listened to catch it.

"Edhart," he called. "Oh, Edhart!"

UNDER proper conditions, being wounded in the shoulder may have its pleasant features. They were not so obvious to Monte in the early part of the evening, because he was pretty much bedridden with ether; but sometime before dawn he woke up.

Monte was conscious of a burning pain in his shoulder, and he was not quite certain as to where he was. So he hitched up on one elbow. This caused a shadow to detach itself from the dark at the other end of the room.

"Who the deuce are you?" he inquired in plain English.

"Monsieur is not to sit up," the shadow answered in plain French.

Monte repeated his question, this time in French.

"I am the nurse sent here by Doctor Marcellin," she informed him. "Monsieur is not to talk."

She placed her hand below his neck and helped him to settle down again upon his pillow. Then she rushed off again beyond the range of the shaded electric light.

"What happened?" Monte called into the dark.

Then he thought he heard a door open, and further rustling, and a whispered conversation.

"Who's that?" he demanded. "Turn up the light, will you?"

"But certainly not," answered the nurse, coming toward him again. "Monsieur is to lie very quiet and sleep."

"I can't sleep."

"Perhaps it will help monsieur to be quiet if he knows his fiancée is in the next room."

Momentarily this announcement appeared to have directly the opposite effect. "My what?" gasped Monte.

"Monsieur's fiancée. With her maid, she is occupying the next apartment in order to be near monsieur. If you are very quiet to-night it is possible that tomorrow the doctor will permit you to see her."

"Was that she who came in and whispered to you?"

"Yes, monsieur."

Monte remained quiet after that—but he was not sleeping. He was thinking.

Marjory was in the next room, awake, and at the sound of his voice had come in. In the dark, even with this great night city of Paris asleep around him, she had come near enough so that he heard the rustle of her skirt and her whispering voice. That was unusual—most unusual—and rather satisfactory. If worse came to worse and he reached a point where it was necessary for him to talk to some one, he could get her in here again in spite of this nurse woman. He had only to call her name.

"Is she in there now?" Monte called to the nurse in the dark.

"Certainly, monsieur. But I thought you were sleeping."

NO, he was not sleeping; but he did not mind now the pain in his shoulder. She had announced herself as his fiancée. Well, technically, she was. He had asked her to marry him, and she had accepted. At the time he had not seen much further ahead than the next few minutes; and even then had not foreseen what was to happen in those few minutes. The proposal had given him his right to talk to Hamilton, and her acceptance—well, it had given Marjory her right to be here. Curious thing about that code of rights and wrongs! Society was a stickler for form. If either he or Marjory had neglected the preliminaries, then he would have lain alone. This nurse woman might have come, but she did not count; and, besides, he had to get shot before even she would be allowed.

Now it was all right. It was all right and proper for her, all right and proper for him, all right and proper for society. Not only that, but it was so utterly normal that society would have frowned if she had not hurried to his side in such an emergency. It forced her here, willy-nilly. Perhaps that was the only reason she was here.

Still, he did not like to think that. She was too true blue to quit a friend. It would be more like her to come anyway. He remembered how she had stood by that old aunt to the end. She would be standing by her to-day were she alive. Even Chic, who fulfilled his own obligations to the last word, had sometimes urged her to lead her own life, and she had only smiled. There was man stuff in her.

"Is Mademoiselle Stockton sitting up—there in the next room?"

"I do not know," answered the nurse. "Do you mind finding out for me?"

"If monsieur will promise to sleep after that."

"How can a man promise to sleep?"

"Monsieur can at least promise not to talk."

"I will do that," agreed Monte.

She came back and reported that mademoiselle was sitting up, and begged to present her regards and express the hope that he was resting comfortably.

"Please to tell her I am, and that I hope she will now go to bed," he answered.

Nurse Duval did that, and returned. "What did she say?" inquired Monte.

"But, monsieur—"

She had no intention of spending the rest of the night as a messenger between those two rooms.

"Very well," submitted Monte. "But you might tell me what she said."

"She said she was not sleepy," answered the nurse.

"I'm glad she's awake," said Monte. Just because he was awake. There was nothing sentimental about this conclusion. He did not think of it as it affected her—merely as it affected him. It gave him rather a comfortable, completed feeling, as if he now had within himself the means for peacefully enjoying life, wherever he might be, even at thirty-two. Under the influence of this soothing thought, he fell asleep again.

AFTER the doctor and his assistant were through with Monte the next morning, they decided, after a consultation, that there was no apparent reason why, during the day, Miss Stockton, if she desired, should not serve as his nurse while Miss Duval went home to sleep.

"My assistant will come in at least twice," said Doctor Marcellin. "Besides, you have the constitution of a prize-fighter. It might well be possible to place a bullet through the heart of such a man without discommodating him."

After they had gone out, Marjory came in. She hesitated at the door a moment, perhaps to make sure he was awake; perhaps to make sure that she herself was awake. Monte, from the bed, could see her better than she could see him. He thought she looked whiter than usual, but she was very beautiful.

There was something about her that distinguished her from other women—from this nurse woman, for example, who was the only other woman with whom it was possible to compare her in a like situation. She was dressed in something white and light and fluffy. Around her white throat there was a narrow band of black velvet.

"Good morning, Marjory," he called. She came at once to his side, walking gracefully, as a princess might walk.

"I didn't know whether you were awake," she said.

It was one thing to have her here in the dark, and another to have her here in broad daylight.

"Did you rest well last night?" she inquired.

"I heard you when you came in and whispered to the nurse woman. It was mighty white of you to come."

"What else could I do?" She seated herself in a chair by his bed.

"Because we are engaged?" he asked. She smiled a little.

"Then you have not forgotten?"

"Forgotten!" he exclaimed. "I'm just beginning to realize it."

"I was afraid it might come back to you as a shock, Monte," she said. "But it is very convenient—at just this time."

"I don't know what I should have done without it," he nodded. "It certainly gives a man a comfortable feeling to know—well, just to know there is some one around."

"I'm glad if I've been able to do anything."

"It's a whole lot just having you here," he assured her.

It changed the whole character of this room, for one thing. It ceased to be merely a hotel room—merely number fifty-four attached with a big brass star to a key. It was more like a room in the Hotel des Roses, which was the nearest to home of any place Monte had found in a decade.

It was as if when she came in she completely refurbished it with little things with which he was familiar. Edhart always used to place flowers in his apartment; and it was like that.

"The only bother with the arrangement," he said, looking serious, "is that it takes your time. Oughtn't you to be at Julien's this morning?"

She had forgotten about Julien's. Yet for the last two years it had been the very center of her own individual life. Now the crowded studio, the smell of turpentine, the odd cosmopolitan gathering of fellow students, the little pangs following the bitter criticisms of the master, receded into the background until they became as a dream of long ago.

"I don't think I shall ever go to Julien's again," she answered.

"But look here—that won't do," he objected. "If I'm to interfere with all your plans—"

"It isn't that, Monte," she assured him. "Ever since I came back this last time, I knew I didn't belong there. When Aunt Kitty was alive it was all the opportunity I had; but now—"

She paused.

"Well?"

"I have my hands full with you until you get out again," she answered lightly.

"That's what I object to," he said. "If being engaged is going to pin you down, then I don't think you ought to be engaged. You've had enough of that in your life."

The curious feature of her present position was that she had no sense of being pinned down. She had thought of this in the night. She had never felt freer in her life. Within a few hours of her engagement she had been able to do exactly what she wished to do without a single qualm of conscience. She had been able to come here and look after him in this emergency.

"Monte," she said, "I'm doing at this moment just exactly what I want to do; and you can't understand what a treat that is, because you've always done just exactly as you wanted. I'm sure I'm entirely selfish about this, because—because I'm not making any sacrifice. You can't understand that, either, Monte—so please don't try. I think we'd better not talk any more about it. Can't we just let it go on as it is a little while?"

"It suits me," smiled Monte. "So maybe I'm selfish, too."

"Maybe," she nodded. "Now I'll see about your breakfast. The doctor told me just what you must have."

So she went out—moving away like a vision in dainty white across the room and out the door. A few minutes later she was back again with a vase of red roses, which she arranged upon the table where he could see them.

MONTE'S recovery was rapid—in many ways more rapid than he desired. In a few days Nurse Duval disappeared, and in a few days more Monte was able to dress himself with the help of the hotel valet, and sit by the window while Marjory read to him. Half the time he gave no heed to what she was reading, but that did not detract from his pleasure in the slightest. He liked the sound of her voice, and liked sitting opposite her.

Her eyes were always interesting when she read. For then she forgot about them and let them have their own way—now to light with a smile, now to darken with disapproval, and sometimes to grow very tender, as the story she happened to be reading dictated.

This was luxury such as Monte had never known, and for more than ten years now he had ordered of the world its choicest in the way of luxury.

At his New York club the experience of many, many years in catering to man comfort was placed at his disposal. That same service was furnished him, if to a more limited extent, on the transatlantic liners. At Davos his needs were anticipated a week in advance; at Nice there had been Edhart.

But no one at his club, on the boat, or at Davos—not even Edhart—had given him this: *this* being the somewhat vague word he used to describe what he was now enjoying as Marjory sat by the window reading to him. It had nothing to do with being read aloud to. He could at any time have summoned a valet to do that, and in five minutes would have felt like throwing the book—any book—at the valet's head. It had nothing to do with the mere fact that she was a woman. Nurse Duval could not have taken her place.

It would seem, then, that in some mysterious way he derived his pleasure from Marjory herself. But, if so, then she had gone farther than all those who made it their life-work to see that man was comfortable; for they satisfied only existing wants, while she created a new one. Whenever she left the room he was conscious of this want.

Yet, when Monte faced the issue